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AUTHOR Jenkins-Friedman, Reva
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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a broad definition of consultation and examines the role of educators of the gifted as facilitators in the consultation practice. Consultation roles and examples are cited in four areas: organizational consultants, who help individuals within a system learn to work with each other; mental health consultants, who stress altering perceptions of client-related problems; behavioral consultants, who focus on behavioral change based on social learning theory; and advocacy consultants, who are oriented towards reducing injustice and oppression in organizations. Two key aspects of effective consulting are identified: reducing interference and resolving conflicts. A short list of references is included. (CL)

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Teachers of the Gifted as Consultants: Issues to Consider

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Reva Jenkins-Friedman, Ph.D.
University of Kansas
Educational Psychology and Research
2 Bailey Hall
Lawrence, KS 66045-2338
(913) 864-4526

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Future teachers of gifted and talented students enter graduate education programs with the expectation that their roles as educators will change drastically when they complete training and start to work with highly able students. Teacher educators encourage this belief, titling these educators as facilitators, consultants, resource managers or mentors of the gifted. Recent studies of relevant competencies for educators of gifted students affirm an altered role, emphasizing work with general education teachers and managing instruction rather than directly teaching gifted pupils (Hultgren, 1982). However, little attention is devoted to defining the role of consultant for the gifted, and even less is offered on how to become an effective consultant. As a result, newly hired consultants are unclear as to who they are professionally, and often slip back into familiar teacher roles, acting as quasi administrators or visiting experts. None of these functions are key features of consultants' work and might limit gifted consultants' effectiveness in working with school personnel, parents and students.

What is consultation? A broad definition would focus on joint efforts at problem solving, involving indirect assistance to a third party (Alpert & Meyers, 1983). The literature describes many types of consultants: four are especially relevant to professionals in education for gifted students: organizational, mental health, behavioral and advocacy. I will offer definitions and illustrate with examples generated by gifted facilitators. I will overview key aspects of the consultation process, and conclude with additional issues for gifted facilitators to consider when initiating or reviewing consultation experiences.

Consultation Roles and Examples

The organizational consultant. This person helps individuals within a system learn to work with each other. If the organization is not functioning effectively, the organizational consultant works to change the system. Sometimes called a process consultant, this educator focuses on how key features and persons in the education system interact. Observation, communication and listening skills are important to the sucess of organizational consulting.

Example: Transportation and scheduling. Students are bussed from seven elementary schools to a central location for their half day, twice-a-week work in the Hereford Independent Study Program. For the past two weeks, the gifted program facilitator has noticed that pupils from School Z are not coming to the program. When she talks to their teachers she discovers that the students' physical education class was recently rescheduled and ends only a few minutes before they are to board the bus for the independent study program. The gifted program facilitator works with the teachers, physical education instructor, vice principal (in charge of scheduling) and bus driver to create a solution that permits the students to participate fully in their home school program as well as in the gifted program.

Example: I.E.P. Conferences. In one of his schools, the gifted program facilitator notices that in staffing conferences, classroom teachers are seldom called on to participate in building the gifted students' i.e.p.s. The school psychologist and parents seem to dominate the discussions. Using active listening techniques, the gifted facilitator makes a special effort to elicit input from the classroom teachers during the next several conferences, and to include student objectives to be met in the classroom. Two teachers spontaneously tell him that they feel more recognized for the contribution they can make to their gifted students' school programs.

The mental health consultant. Altering the consultee's perception of a client-related problem is the key function of this consultant. Changes in understanding that will help the client is the goal of mental health consultation. The pioneer in this type of consultation, Gerald Caplan, identifies issues for the mental health consultant to target. Four have particular bearing on the work of gifted education facilitators: lack of knowledge, lack of skills, lack of confidence and lack of objectivity (Caplan, 1970). Caplan believes that eliminating the barriers formed by these problems allows the consultee to work more effectively with the client.

Example: Lack of knowledge. Ms. Billings, classroom teacher, informs the gifted program facilitator that she plans to request that Jimmy, a gifted student, be dropped from the program. "His work certainly isn't igfted. He sometimes missed three or four spelling words, and he isn't my top student." Realizing that Ms. Billings lacks accurate information about the nature of giftedness, the gifted facilitator spends some time collecting a few case studies and relevant ERIC Digests on the Gifted and Talented. He shares them with Ms. Billings, and makes a date to discuss the information. Ms. Billings realizes that high ability is not synonymous with high achievement, and that Jimmy is probably gifted.

The behavioral consultant. Similar to the mental health consultant, this person focuses on behavioral change rather than shifting perceptions. Behavioral consultation is based on social learning theory rather than a psychodynamic orientation.

Example: A student who doesn't complete assignments. Ms. Monroe, an elementary gifted facilitator, discovers that Cheryl is such a perfectionist that she seldom finished her work. She talks to the girl's classroom teacher, who has noticed the same problem, and offers to collaborate on a strategy. Together they develop a goal setting and contracting program for Cheryl, focusing on short assignments on topics she knows well. They create a plan to help Cheryl set realistic goals for herself, and to get over her fear of failure. Ms. Monroe models a contracting conference for Cheryl's teacher, who has limited training on this topic. They meet occasionally to review Cheryl's progress.

The advocacy consultant. Oriented towards reducing injustice and oppression in organizations, this consultative role is based on conflict theory (i.e. accepting conflict as a preeminent dynamic in organizations). Often pictured as guarding the legal perogatives of exceptional children and their parents, the advocacy consultant has more recently been linked with supporting teachers' rights.

Example: Independent evaluations for a gifted program. Mr. and Mrs. Phillips think that their five-year-old, Jesse, might be gifted. Concerned by rumors that the school district will not evaluate him until the second grade, they contact the gifted facilitator for a referral to an independent psychologist for testing. Mr. Jordan informs the Phillips of the state guidelines regarding referral and identification and urges them to initiate the process after the first month of school, when Jesse's teacher would have had an opportunity to observe him. Mr. Jordan assures them that he will spend some time in Jesse's class, and talk with the teacher about Jesse's progress. They make a conference appointment for early October to review the situation.

Comments regarding consultant roles. From the descriptions and examples presented above, it is apparent that the gifted facilitator's consultative activities are multidimensional and that categories often overlap. Keeping the four roles in mind can help facilitators clarify why and when to involve themselves in particular nonteaching activities.

Two Key Aspects of Effective Consulting

Whatever the context, effective communication is the foundation of good consultation. Two categories of activity emerge from the school psychology and special education literature: reducing theme interference and negociating (Conoley, 1981; Conoley & Conoley, 1982; Parker, 1975). I will briefly describe each in action.

Reducing interference. According to the mental health consultation model, the consultee's perception of client-related problems is crucial to the sucess of any consultative encounter. Four problems that can interfere with the consultee's perception of the client's problems were described in the previous section: lack of knowledge, lack of skill, lack of confidence and lack of objectivity. Recognizing the particular issue in action can help the gifted facilitator to select appropriate strategies for establishing a peer-partner working relationship with classroom teachers.

Negotiation skills. In their book, Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, Fisher and Ury (1981) describe four principles for resolving conflicts:

1. Separate the PEOPLE from the problem;

2. Focus in INTERESTS, not positions;

3. Invent OPTIONS for mutual gain;

4. Insist on OBJECTIVE criteria.

They contend that effective joint problem solving depends on the involved parties aligning themselves to work together on a problem of mutual concern and by avoiding labels of "right" and "wrong" (alternately, there are situations that "work" or that "don't work"). When the negotiating parties are less defensive, it becomes easier to identify mutually beneficial principles, to generate many problem-solving options and to develop abjective criteria for prioritizing solutions.

Additional Issues to Consider

Training in consultative techniques notwithstanding, the school culture must understand and value consultation for the consultant to make large-scale differences. Administrative actions that help establish the consultant's credibility, systemic support and reinforcement for joint educative planning and problem-solving and encouragement for advice-seeking play key roles in the ease with which the gifted education consultant might establish him/herself in this position delicately balanced among teacher, therapist and diplomat.

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